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UNCLAS COLOMBO 000020

SIPDIS

AIDAC

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: DECLARATION OF DISASTER - SRI LANKA-COMPLEX  
EMERGENCY

1. SUMMARY: IN DECEMBER 2001, FOLLOWING FIVE YEARS OF THE BLOODIEST BATTLES IN SRI LANKA'S 20-YEAR CIVIL CONFLICT, THE LIBERATION TIGERS OF TAMIL EELAM (LTTE) AND THE GOVERNMENT OF SRI LANKA (GSL), RESPECTIVELY, DECLARED UNILATERAL CEASE-FIRES IN SHORT SUCCESSION. THESE UNILATERAL CEASEFIRES WERE REPLACED BY A FORMAL MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING IN FEBRUARY 2002 THAT LED TO A SERIES OF NORWEGIAN GOVERNMENT-BROKERED TALKS BETWEEN THE LTTE AND THE GSL. IN NOVEMBER 2002, THE NORWEGIAN GOVERNMENT HOSTED A POLITICALLY-FOCUSED DONOR'S CONFERENCE IN OSLO, FOLLOWED BY A MEETING BETWEEN THE LTTE AND GSL IN WHICH THE TWO PARTIES AGREED TO FURTHER STEPS TO SOLIDIFY THE PEACE PROCESS. AS 2003 COMMENCES, SRI LANKA HAS EXPERIENCED A FULL YEAR OF PEACE. THERE IS OPTIMISM THAT THE NEW YEAR WILL BRING FURTHER GAINS AND SET THE STAGE FOR AN END TO ONE OF ASIA'S LONGEST RUNNING CIVIL WARS. END SUMMARY.

2. SINCE THE SRI LANKA CONFLICT BEGAN IN 1983, AN ESTIMATED 65,000 PEOPLE HAVE BEEN KILLED AND UP TO ONE MILLION PEOPLE HAVE BEEN DISPLACED EITHER WITHIN SRI LANKA OR TO INDIA'S SOUTHERN STATE OF TAMIL NADU. WHILE A 1995 PEACE INITIATIVE BROUGHT SOME HOPE THAT THE CONFLICT COULD BE SETTLED THROUGH PEACEFUL NEGOTIATIONS, THESE TALKS QUICKLY BROKE DOWN AND USHERED IN FIVE MORE YEARS OF FIGHTING THAT KILLED THOUSANDS AND LED TO A MILITARY STALEMATE. COMBINED WITH ECONOMIC DECLINE BROUGHT ON BY YEARS OF WAR AND THE EXTERNAL PRESSURE BROUGHT TO BEAR ON THE LTTE AS A TERRORIST-DESIGNATED ORGANIZATION, THE TWO WARRING PARTIES DECIDED TO INITIATE THE CURRENT PEACE INITIATIVE THAT MOST OBSERVERS AGREE IS SRI LANKA'S BEST CHANCE IN TWO DECADES TO END THE BITTER CIVIL CONFLICT.

3. THE ROOTS OF SRI LANKA'S ARMED CONFLICT ARE DEEP AND COMPLEX. A LASTING PEACE WILL NOT BE OBTAINED ONLY BY SIGNING A NEGOTIATED POLITICAL COMPROMISE. PEACE WILL REQUIRE A PROCESS OF CHANGE IN SOCIO-ETHNIC ATTITUDES, REFORM OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION. THE MOST IMMEDIATE TRANSITIONAL PROBLEM IS TO KEEP THE PEACE TALKS ON TRACK. THERE ARE TENSIONS AT WORK THAT COULD DERAIL THE PROCESS, INCLUDING PARTISAN POLITICS, LOCALIZED VIOLENT FLARE-UPS BETWEEN VARIOUS RELIGIOUS/ETHNIC GROUPS, AND SINHALESE ANXIETIES OVER LOSS OF PRIMACY. IN THE SHORT TERM, PARTICULARLY WHILE THE TALKS ARE UNDERWAY, IT WILL BE CRUCIAL TO MAINTAIN AND BROADEN THE CONSTITUENCY FOR PEACE AND MITIGATE CONFLICT AMONG VARIOUS POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC GROUPS. SUCH EFFORTS SHOULD SERVE THIS IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVE, BUT ALSO HELP BUILD THE FOUNDATION FOR LONGER TERM, MORE COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMS THAT AMELIORATE SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PROBLEMS.

4. AS MOST CLEARLY DEMONSTRATED BY RECENT HIGH LEVEL STATE DEPARTMENT REPRESENTATION AT THE NOVEMBER OSLO CONFERENCE, THE US HAS AN IMPORTANT INTEREST IN SUPPORTING THE GOVERNMENT OF SRI LANKA AND THE COUNTRY'S TAMIL AND MUSLIM MINORITIES DURING THE CURRENT TRANSITIONAL PERIOD. ACTIVITIES THAT CAN BE SUPPORTED BY THE USG AND THAT STRENGTHEN A PEACE CONSTITUENCY AND MITIGATE CONFLICT INCLUDE: SUPPORT FOR LOCAL PEACE COMMITTEES, COMMUNITY PROJECTS THAT PROMOTE INTER-ETHNIC COOPERATION, ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AND INFORMATION CAMPAIGNS TO INFORM COMMUNITIES ON THE PEACE PROCESS, FUNDING INITIATIVES OF MODERATE LOCAL LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS, AND SUPPORT FOR SMALL COMMUNITY SELF HELP PROJECTS IN WAR-AFFECTED AREAS.

5. FOR THESE REASONS, I HAVE DETERMINED THAT A CIVIL-POLITICAL CRISIS EXISTS IN SRI LANKA AND, AS REQUIRED BY LAW, AM HEREBY EXERCISING MY DISASTER ASSISTANCE AUTHORITY UNDER SECTION 491 OF THE FOREIGN ASSISTANCE ACT TO REQUEST THAT USAID/DCHA/OTI RESOURCES BE MADE AVAILABLE IN SUPPORT OF THE IMMEDIATE POST CONFLICT NEEDS AND TO SUPPORT PEACEFUL DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN SRI LANKA.

WILLS